

VZCZCXRO7191
PP RUEHTRO
DE RUEHAS #1121/01 2901246
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 161246Z OCT 08
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6497
INFO RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2891
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 9059
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 2533
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 7386
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
RUEHNC/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6526
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1735
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0718
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 3546
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001121

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/16/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [EDU](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: TRILINGUAL ILLITERATES: ALGERIA'S LANGUAGE CRISIS

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Decades of government-imposed Arabization have produced an under-40 population that, in the words of frustrated Algerian business leaders, "is not fluent in anything" and therefore handicapped in the job market and more vulnerable to extremist influence. The Algerian school system now produces graduates who must first take the time and money after university to re-learn subjects like engineering, science and commerce in French in order to compete for jobs in Algeria and abroad. The phenomenon has driven those Algerian students who can afford it to look outside the system for an education in French or English at private schools in Algeria or Europe. The legacy of Arabization has also exposed a generational rift among those who passed through the public education system: the over-40s are generally fluent in spoken and written French and feel it is a strong part of their cultural identity, while the under-20s have been educated entirely in Arabic, with French as a poorly learned second language. The 20-40 age group now competing for jobs speaks a confusing mixture of French, Arabic and Berber that one business leader called "useless," as they cannot make themselves fully understood by anyone but themselves. We hear at all levels that this problem has led to a tremendous appetite for English -- a neutral, global language unburdened by Algerian history -- as the best way forward. END SUMMARY.

LANGUAGE RIFT BEGINS WITH INDEPENDENCE

¶2. (U) Algeria's Arabization campaign began as a reaction to the French colonial experience and came almost immediately after independence in 1962. A May 22, 1964 decree made Arabic the official language of government and administration. Given the dearth of fluent Arabic teachers in Algeria at the time, Arabic-language education began in 1962 with a mandatory seven hours per week in all schools at all levels. The figure increased to ten hours per week in ¶1964. To fill the demand for Arabic teachers, Algeria began importing Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi and other instructors from across the Arab world, which met with some resistance from Algeria's teachers unions and also brought an influx of Arab ideology -- much of it religious and conservative -- into the country.

¶3. (U) In 1974, the government mandated that all primary school education be in Arabic, and in 1976 French was dealt the coup de grace when it was formally relegated to second-language status, with instruction beginning only in the fourth year of primary school. The trend continued into the 1980s and in 1989 the government mandated that Arabic be

used on all signs and public communication, with penalties for violators. Since 1989, classical Arabic has been the sole language of instruction in all Algerian primary and secondary schools, a reality formalized in article 15 of law 91-05 of January 16, 1991. University subjects are also taught in Arabic -- without exception since former Prime Minister Abdelaziz Belkhadem refused to allow scientific and technical subjects to revert to French-language instruction. In one famous public statement, Belkhadem said that would be tantamount to "a regression" and that the solution for Algerians to compete in the international job market was not for French to be taught in Algeria, but for Arabic to spread to the rest of the region from Algeria's example.

THE LOST GENERATION

14. (C) Over an iftar dinner at the Ambassador's residence towards the end of Ramadan, several Algerian business representatives lamented what they called the "lost generation" of Algerian workers, who are left out largely because of their inability to function at a professional level in any single language. Ameziane Ait Ahcene, Northrup Grumman's deputy director for Algeria, complained that he had to recruit in francophone Europe to find skilled accountants and engineers who were fluent in spoken and written French. Mohamed Hakem, marketing and communications director for the ETRHB Haddad group, shared the same sentiment, adding that the process of providing language training in French or English to new recruits was often prohibitively expensive and added too much time to the recruitment process. Often, Hakem

ALGIERS 00001121 002 OF 002

said, "it takes one to two years" to re-educate an Algerian graduate in specialized vocabulary and international standards for technical and scientific work in particular. Hakem said the lack of ability for most Algerians "to communicate with anyone other than themselves" isolates Algerian youth and makes them more vulnerable to extremist ideology.

15. (C) Ait Ahcene added that the current job market favored Algeria's wealthy elites, who can afford to send their children to private schools in France or Canada, for example, to make them competitive after graduation. In his view, the vast majority of the population, 72 percent of which is under the age of 30, represented a "lost generation" that Arabization "without compromise" had created. One contact recalled a late-1980s class in British civilization taught by the inspirational University of Algiers Professor Lacey. Professor Lacey, whose students supposedly represented the best the Algerian university system could produce at the time, paused and shook his head after a futile review of their translation efforts between French, Arabic and English. "It's unbelievable," he told them, "you are trilingual illiterates."

ENGLISH AS THE THIRD WAY

16. (C) During an October 14 introductory meeting with the Ambassador, National Popular Assembly (APN - lower house of parliament) Speaker Abdelaziz Ziari described the tremendous historical baggage that came with the French language in Algeria. He said that in the first decades after independence, Algeria came to reject French completely as a symbol of over 130 years of colonial rule. Over time attitudes softened, and the tensions and resistance associated with using the French language faded. Today, Ziari said, Algeria's priority was to increase its English-language abilities, and he bemoaned the lack of qualified parliamentary staff who could function in fluent spoken and written English. Northrup Grumman's Ait Ahcene put it simply, saying that English offered "freedom from the past" and was unburdened by memories of the French colonial experience on the one hand and "excessive Arabization" on the

other. Aicha Barki, president of the nationwide women's literacy organization Iqra, told us recently that the Arabization process had made achieving literacy in general more difficult, as Arabic is simply a much harder language to master than either French or English.

COMMENT: A MARSHALL PLAN FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

17. (C) Barki sees literacy as the key to realizing the full potential of Algerian women and to fighting radicalization and extremist ideology, which, she said, feast on the illiterate. Algeria's language crisis is unique in the Arab world, given the country's turbulent history and the existence of an entire generation fluent only in a linguistic collage known as "Algerian." Diplomats coming to Algeria after serving elsewhere in the region are amazed that Algerians rarely finish a sentence in the same language they started it in. Given that what business leaders Hakem and Ait Ahcene call the "lost generation" contains the vast majority of Algeria's population, the language issue assumes an even more disproportionate importance in Algeria. At stake is not just the ability of anyone other than the wealthy elite to participate in the international economy. Equally important is the need to counter the opportunities the crisis creates for extremism to take root. It is no surprise then that throughout the Ambassador's introductory meetings with senior Algerian officials, one theme has been repeated consistently: the desire for a large-scale increase in English-language instruction throughout the government, private sector and educational system. As the director of cooperation at the Ministry of Higher Education recently told us, Algeria "needs a Marshall Plan for the English language."

PEARCE